

Autrey, Department excited about increased role of peer support

In late September, over two dozen Alabama consumers gathered at Shocco Springs for five days of training toward becoming Certified Peer Support Specialists (CPS). Conducted by a team from the national organization of the Depression and Bi-Polar Support Alliance (DBSA), the training was described by OCA Director Mike Autrey as "intense."

"The training session itself was really great," Autrey said. "It was intense. It went from early till late. It was just much better than I even thought it could be."

Autrey said the move toward certifying peer support specialists is a culmination of many years of work by many people.

"This is something we are all excited about," he said. "We've had peer support specialists in our hospitals for years, starting with Fannie Hicks at Greil in 1994. But this is taking it to a whole new level. Our long-range goal is to have a full-time equivalent position for a CPS at every mental health center in the state."

Autrey said having peer support in the community has long been a dream of his, and that groundbreaking work in Georgia led to peer training being accepted by both treatment specialists and administrators around the country.

"Peer support has been approved as an evidence-based practice at many levels," he said. "It has been endorsed by the

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OFFICE OF Consumer Relations wins award

BY JOHN HOUSTON
 Commissioner, ADMH/MR



Recently, Mike Autrey and his staff in our Office of Consumer Relations were recognized as "Heroes In The Fight" by Mental Health America. This award recognizes the good work done by Mike, James Jones, and Janet Jackson, who serve as a "listening" ear and helping hand to consumers across the state. They do this job all day every day with knowledge, integrity and compassion. When a consumer needs them, they are there.

All of us want to be in control of our own destiny, of our own lives. People with mental illness are no different. Being able to make our own decisions is empowering and not being

able to make these decisions makes us feel powerless, helpless. It should be no surprise that part of the process of recovery involves helping people to gain the confidence to make their own decisions and to be able to

"Who then can so softly bind up the wound of another as he who has felt the same wound himself?"

Thomas Jefferson

manage their own affairs. The mental health system across the country has for decades promoted the value of having a consumer and family driven system of mental health

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Named “Consumer Of The Year” by NAMI

Jester has lived exciting life, dedicates self to helping others

Nancy Jester, a well-known Alabama consumer advocate, was recently recognized by Alabama NAMI as “Consumer of the Year.” Nancy’s years of advocacy and caring for others started when she was just a young child.

“I am originally from California,” said Nancy, who now makes her home in Cullman. “I have been what is called a ‘hero child’ since the age of three. That means since that age I was the adult and had to care for sick family members. I was just that person in my family who, if someone was sick, I was sent to take care of them. I have never had much of a love for self, but have my self-worth wrapped up in serving others.”

Jester said although she didn’t know it at the time, her grandmother had depression along with several other physical illnesses. Her mother tried to commit suicide several times.

“I found her and kept her from doing it,” Jester recalled. “So I know both the pain and the strength that a child has and I believe we carry that with us. But as we become adults we hone our skills and learn from our history and find ways to help other people tough it out through tough times.”

Jester shows that strength in her views about mental illness.

“People should take time to thank God for their mental illness,” she said. “That which doesn’t kill us makes us stronger, makes us better able to serve. God has given us natural abilities as consumers. Sharing with others helps you in your own recovery. Being able to acknowledge that you have a mental illness is hard for consumers, but that difficulty is surpassed only by our families’ struggle to deal with it. God gives us these trials really as a blessing. We can take our challenges and prepare for the future and share our experiences with other people.”

Jester had her first diagnosis at age 13, but said her diagnoses through the years have “depended on where I was and which doctor

I talked to.” She had a difficult childhood, and had to repress much of it. She took meds for her nerves, and went off to college – in her words – “too immature for the group I was with.” She carried enormous academic loads and worked almost full time. She averaged two hours of sleep a day.



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“No one told me that wasn’t the norm,” Jester said. “I worked that way until I physically broke down. I was experiencing deep depression and mania. They wanted to put me on Valium but my mom said all I needed was my grandmother’s homemade bread. I can tell you it was a rough time. It took a toll on me.”

After college Jester took a professional job in accounting, got married, and had her first child. She said looking back she realizes she was experiencing post-partum depression.

“I had to literally separate myself from my children for a while,” she said. “I always thought I could do anything and I rebelled in my 20s. One example of this was when I showed up at my accounting job on a motorcycle with a three piece suit and three inch heels. It was a rigid dress code and that’s how I reacted to it.”

Jester’s professional life took a unique turn when she was introduced to the over-the-road trucking industry. She got a CDL and her own truck.

“That opened up a whole new world for me,” Jester said. “At a little over five feet tall and 105 pounds, I found out I could handle a tractor trailer as well as anyone. It let me use my mania to stay awake and when I was down I just worked a little bit harder. I drove for 20 years. During that time I received a couple of driving awards and became a member of the million mile club with the National Drivers Registry. That means I drove for over one million miles without a ticket, without an accident, without any problem whatsoever. I am very proud of that.”

This was during the 1980s, and was just one of many stages of Jester’s very eventful life. She has been in many professional environments, including advertising and accounting when she was, in her own words, “at the height of my game.” But at other times when she was down she allowed herself to be homeless even though she had a home.

Her constant has always been a burning desire to serve others.

“After several years of being up, down and sideways, I foolishly married a man I hadn’t known long and moved with him to Alabama,” Jester said. “But there was a bright side to it. It was here that I found a therapist who listened to me instead of telling me what he thought. He listened and gave me back information that I needed to work with him as a partner. This was the first time I’d ever had such caring, effective treatment.”

He suggested that Jester should keep a jour-

nal, which she did. She continues to believe that journaling is a sure key for recovery.

“By doing that he showed me I could be an absolute tiger for others when I previously couldn’t even advocate for myself. It turned my world around.”

As a result of this collaboration, Jester began the work that eventually led her to become a statewide consumer leader and advocate. She founded two separate support groups in the Cullman area, CARE and R.E.S.T.T. (Recovery, Education, Support, Time, and Treatment)

“In that original group we had all day treatment people, but consumers started coming to us from outpatient treatment and we discovered we could be our own best family. We had meetings and dinner and we would share and we basically went on like that for several years. At some of our dinners we’d have well over 100 people. They knew they could come not just for food but for support. I, along with many others, gained real strength from that support group.”

Jester started two or three other groups that are still up and running but they are closed groups which include many professional people. They are doing well on their own, but Jester prefers to work in more “open” consumer groups where everyone is welcome.

“After starting all those groups in Cullman I had opportunities to begin working more with the Department on a statewide basis,” Jester said. “I was on the Directions Council for starters, and from that point on it seemed like doors opened and I wasn’t afraid to walk through them. I just love talking to consumers

and keeping people abreast of what’s going on. I visited other support groups and continued networking at Shocco. I belong to the Alabama Minority Consumer Council. I do health fairs handing out materials. When I found out we had a NAMI group in Cullman I started going there and saw that in point of fact families can and do care but they need

Jester plans to continue her work.

“One of my favorite things is running the hospitality room at Shocco,” she said. “To me, the bingo games there reflect what it means to be a consumer. Mental illness is a thief and can rob you of respect and who you were. But only if you allow it to happen. In the bingo games, if you participate and put



“One of my favorite things is running the hospitality room at Shocco,” she said. “To me, the bingo games there reflect what it means to be a consumer. Mental illness is a thief and can rob you of respect and who you were. But only if you allow it to happen. In the bingo games, if you participate and put forth effort you can win. By reclaiming your life you can do anything. You’ve just got to be able to walk out into the streets and to know deep down that you are God’s child.”

education. They have heartache and don’t know what to do to help and often end up hurting their loved ones.”

Jester had come full circle, from being too shy to advocate for herself to becoming an “absolute tiger,” working on behalf of her fellow Alabama consumers. She is the president of WINGS, Alabama’s statewide consumer group, and is on the board of the North Alabama Regional Hospital, where she works for all practical purposes as a case manager helping consumers.

“I’ve always been quiet but my last therapist helped me find my voice,” she said. “Now I am at ease about speaking out, but when they announced I had won the NAMI Consumer of the Year Award I was truly speechless.”

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“To be a leader you have to be a worker. You are there to help people and not to just hold a title. Helping others is what my joy is and helping others is what energizes me. I get called at all hours of the day and night. But you know what? I like it. I am always there. Because if it’s important enough for them to seek me out it’s important enough for me to stop what I’m doing and take the time to listen.”

Peer Specialist Trainer

praises Alabama training experience



Matt Mattson, DBSA Peer Support Training Director, recently joined over two dozen Alabama consumers at Shocco Springs for five days of intensive training. The goal was to prepare these Alabamians to become Certified Peer Support Specialists (CPS). Once qualified, they will be eligible for full time equivalent positions in community mental health centers around the state. Mattson was joined at

not a replacement for any part of the existing mental health system. CPS should not replace a case manager or social worker, but they do bring a unique set of skills delivering hope and their own recovery story.”

Past participants in the training note the irony that this was the first time that their history of mental illness, which has always been a liability, was now a strength.

“We do many things in our training, but we emphasize how to talk about hope and setting real life goals and being someone to help consumers navigate the system,” Mattson said. “Without hope we cannot begin the journey of recovery. When these three things are working together it takes a different angle than what any other provider could possibly deliver. It’s a very exciting movement.”

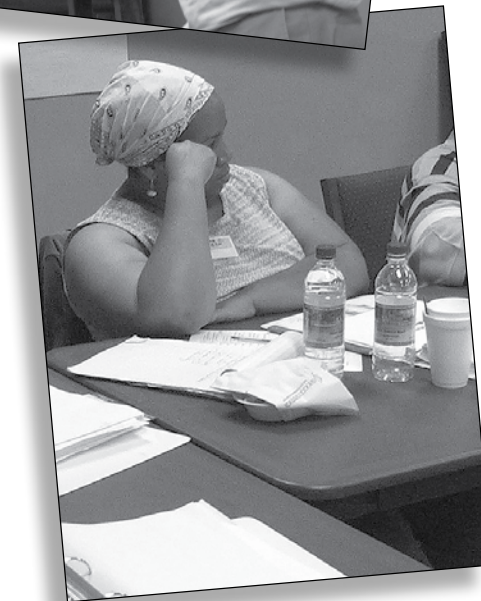
DBSA is working with 20 different states on training and certifying peer support specialists.

“Alabama has had peer specialists in hospital settings for some time and that’s

going well,” Mattson observed. “But the state of Alabama has now expanded its vision to have peer specialists in the community mental health centers. Alabama is committed to making this a reality as much as anybody in the country. From the commissioner on down, Alabama stood up and said we are going to do this and involve all stakeholders. They understand it’s a big part of transforming the system. Alabama is really exciting to work with. I joked when I came there for the first time that I never thought of Alabama as a progressive place. But its mental health system is progressive, innovative, and is putting the consumer first. There’s a lot of talk about doing that across the country. Alabama is actually doing it.”

Mattson said research results clearly show that peer support is an effective treatment option at every level. Whether CPS or community volunteers, peer support has been shown to increase natural support in the community and reduce symptoms and hospitalizations.

“Just as important, peer support increases hope or decreases hopelessness, however you want to put it,” he said. “Without hope that they can get better there is no need for a consumer to go on. If there is one part of the system that is constantly emphasizing hope,



The Peer Specialist Certification Training Program should give the trainees the solid introduction to the following competencies:

- 1) - an understanding of their job and the skills to do that job;
 - understand the basic structure of the state MHS and how it works
 - understand the CPS job description and Code of Ethics within the state MHS
 - understand the meaning and role of peer support
 - understand the difference in treatment goals and recovery goals
 - be able to create and facilitate a variety of group activities that support and strengthen recovery
 - be able to do the necessary documentation required by the state
 - be able to help a consumer combat negative self-talk, overcome fears, and solve problems
 - be able to help a consumer articulate, set and accomplish his/her goals
 - be able to teach other consumers to create their own Wellness Recovery Action Plan
 - be able to teach other consumers to advocate for the services that they want
 - be able to help a consumer create a Person Centered Plan
- 2) - an understanding of the recovery process and how to use their own recovery story to help others
 - understand the five stages in the recovery process and what is helpful and not helpful at each stage
 - understand the role of peer support at each stage of the recovery process
 - understand the power of beliefs/values and how they support or work against recovery
 - understand the basic philosophy and principles of psychosocial rehabilitation
 - understand the basic definition and dynamics of recovery
 - be able to articulate what has been helpful and what has not been helpful in his/her own recovery
 - be able to identify beliefs and values a consumer holds that works against his/her recovery
 - be able to discern when and how much of their recovery story to share with whom
- 3) - an understanding of and the ability to establish healing relationships
 - understand the dynamics of power, conflict and integrity in the workplace
 - understand the concept of ‘seeking out common ground’
 - understand the meaning and importance of cultural competency
 - be able to ask open ended questions that relate a person to his/her inner wisdom
 - be able to personally deal with conflict and difficult interpersonal relations in the workplace
 - be able to demonstrate an ability to participate in ‘healing communication’
 - be able to interact sensitively and effectively with people of other cultures
- 4) - an understanding of the importance of and have the ability to take care of oneself
 - understand the dynamics of stress and burnout
 - understand the role and parts of the Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP)
 - be able to discuss his/her own tools for taking care of him/herself



"We had five full very intense days of training for skills and competencies necessary to become peer support specialists," he said. "If a person has consumer experiences they are qualified, but we are teaching them to use those experiences in a way that is most helpful to other people. We focus on goal setting, helping people get past their fears, and basic recovery orientation."

that in itself can transform the way mental health care is delivered."

Proof that peer support is both cost effective for states and valuable to consumers was further emphasized when the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services sent a letter to the states outlining how to qualify CPS work for Medicaid payments. Part of its message contained the following endorsement:

Peer support services are an evidence-based mental health model of care which consists of a qualified peer support provider who assists individuals with their recovery from mental illness and substance use disorders. CMS recognizes that the experiences of peer support providers, as consumers of mental health and substance use services, can be an important component in a State's delivery of effective treatment. CMS is reaffirming its commitment to State flexibility, increased innovation, consumer choice, self-direction, recovery, and consumer protection through approval of these services.

"This is the government's way of saying we need these pieces of the puzzle," Mattson said. "This is a whole new way of acknowledging the importance of lived experience, and consumers sharing those with other consumers. This is a move in the direction of actually becoming a consumer-driven system. For me it is a clear measurement of a recovery-oriented transformation happening in Alabama and in the country."

There is no national test to become certified, but it is state-specific for certification in the same way that counselors are certified. There are, however, a certain set of competencies that everyone is looking for, and CPS candidates are tested on that (see accompanying competencies sheet).

Mattson was impressed at how Alabama streamlined the process of making certification available, since states are often saddled with bureaucratic burdens.

"Alabama was able to get the key stakeholders on board," he said. "You think of states moving at a snail's pace but here it

was really efficient and the commitment was strong from top to bottom. At our meeting in Montgomery, Molly Brooms said we are looking for certain centers to pilot this program. I was hoping one or two might volunteer. But almost everyone there bought in! It was really inspiring. The centers, and everyone involved in the Department, were overwhelmingly supportive."

Mattson said the training at Shocco Springs was intense, but exhilarating.

"We had five full very intense days of training for skills and competencies necessary to become peer support specialists," he said. "If a person has consumer experiences they are qualified, but we are teaching them to use those experiences in a way that is most helpful to other people. We focus on goal setting, helping people get past their fears, and basic recovery orientation. Some of the most exciting stuff is conflict and integrity in the workplace. CPS candidates must understand the specific role of the job. Don't go beyond it but respect its integrity. We study ethics.



Facilitating recovery means exploring hope in a million different ways. If you can't see greener pastures then what's the point of getting out of bed? We work on that a lot – providing hope at every turn."

"It was an incredible group of people there," Mattson said of the Shocco consumers. "We had an interesting mix of seasoned, experienced advocates as well as people who are just finding their way to use their lived experience. They were amazing people. I was so impressed with the engagement. The content of the training is so intense. It digs so deep. It is the first time they've had the conversation about goals and fears. Setting a goal of work and having my own home is challenging to those who mainly have had a goal of taking their meds and going to the doctor. How does it affect you, and how can you use it to affect other people? That's what we work on to become certified."



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Visionary Guild

members bond, grow on annual art retreat

For the third time in as many years, Alabama's Visionary Guild for Mentally Ill Artists held a Retreat at Camp ASCCA near Alexander City on Lake Martin. Again, the main focus at the three-day event was writing and painting, but that's only part of the story.

"Our first retreat began when Carole Eskridge felt it would be good to bring our artists together to exchange ideas and bond and grow," said Sylvia Richey, president of the Visionary Guild. "We had our second retreat last February and our writers and painters enjoyed it so much we resolved to do it again. Our most recent event was October 11-13, and it was as wonderful as anything I can imagine."

After eight months of planning, Richey said it was great to finally get it all together,



to the world," she said. "It really sets the mood for thinking and reflecting and just being creative, all in an amazingly relaxed atmosphere. It just feels like family, where you can work

on your art all day and then enjoy a bonfire and singing and fun at night."

Richey said another important part of the event is the quality of the teachers.

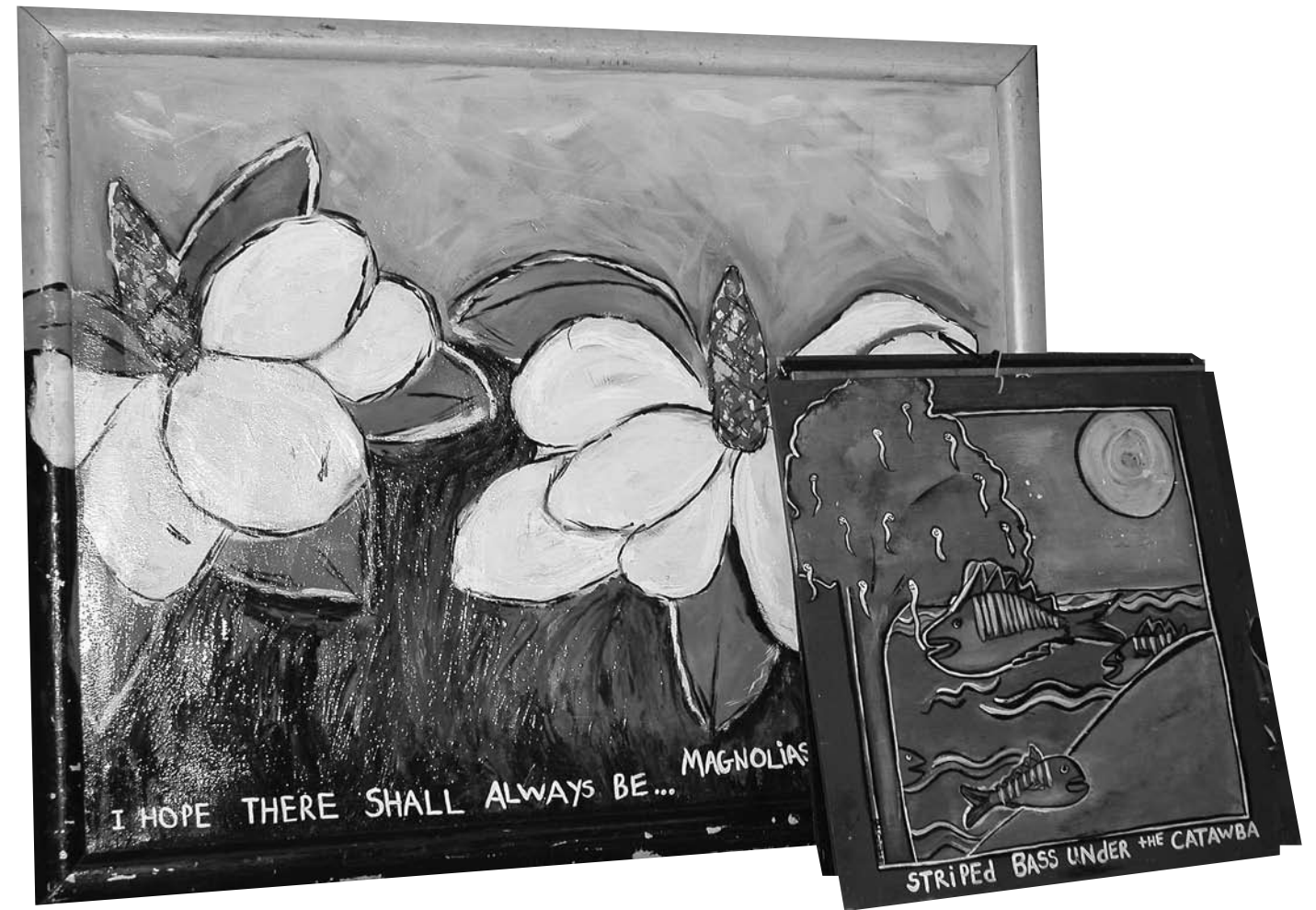
"Every one of our teachers was fabulous, and some of them even stayed around to work as artists themselves," she said.

Widely-acclaimed folk artist She She,

who was recommended to the group by the Birmingham Fine Arts Museum, was the highlight of the weekend.

"She She does shows all over the South, and even after she worked with us all day she had to go to Hoover and to the Civil Rights Museum for shows and events going on there. We were so lucky to get her because she brings such passion, intensity, love and enthusiasm to an art setting. She She has a constant outpouring of positive vibes and creativity. Everyone loved her."

She She talked to the artists about using what they had at hand to make art, both for the canvas and in their imaginations. She encouraged the painters to "think outside the box," look at their surroundings and use whatever they had at hand to make art, from fireplace ashes to housepaint. The artists responded well to She She's way of encouraging



their individual talents and techniques, while keeping a professional perspective.

"The art that the consumers turned out was simply amazing," Richey said. "Of course when you combine their experience and talent with She She's instruction that is not totally surprising, but these works were just spectacular. They were all colorful, vibrant and exciting. They caught a real flair for producing folk art and, to the person, they want to do it again as soon as we can."

She She told the participants that anyone can be an artist, God has given us what we need, and it is just a matter of unlocking our minds. She told those in attendance there were "no limits" on their creativity.

Likewise, according to Richey, the writers enjoyed their work and grew from it as a result.

"For the second year in a row, we had George Littleton from Auburn come join us," she said. "He started us off in a kind of thinking mode, reading well-known short poems together and talking about what they meant to everyone. Most of the poems focused on the seasons, and how they reflect changes

in our moods and senses, but sometimes we would just go over material that he thought we would enjoy. We read the John Keats poem 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' and just had a great time talking about it. George said he even got a nice letter from one of our writers saying how much she enjoyed that one. George always tells us the difference between working with us and the university students he teaches is that we have real life experiences, and are therefore much better able to really understand the human trials and emotions expressed through the years by our great poets. So it's really more of a sharing workshop than it is direct instruction."

After a morning of reading and discussing, the writers began working on their own poetry, which Littleton read with the writers, offering comments and suggestions. The writers continued working beyond the scheduled session, writing alone or in small groups throughout the weekend as inspiration or ideas came to them. It was in every way a retreat, dedicated to art and the art of relaxation.

"The main theme to come out of the





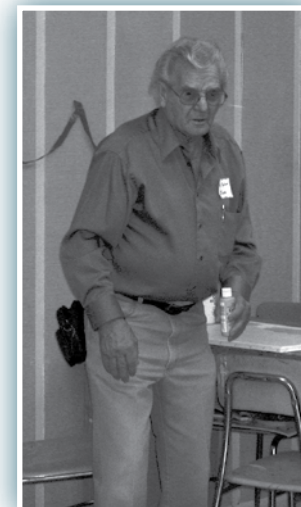
Visionary Guild

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poems was change and the seasons and how those tie together, but at least two of us wrote about our families and grandchildren and how they change and how we see our life and our legacies through them. It all created different trains of thought for the poets. They come away rejuvenated and they all have a good time together."

In addition to the primary subjects, two other instruction classes were held at the retreat. Carole Eskridge taught an art history class after She had finished her painting instruction. Her focus was on Western art and how it has become what it is. Sara Parfait, who was also one of the writing students for the weekend, taught those in attendance about the intricacies of book publishing. Being a published poet herself, Sara used her book *Falling Back Together* to help writers understand what she had to do to get the book published. She also explained how to get a copyright and other things that writers encounter in the publishing world.

"The support system there is just reaffirming," Richey said of the retreat. "It is an atmosphere of enchantment and friendship and bonding and art. Our people did great and it made me feel good and they wanted to do it again, so that lets you know it went right. It is a wonderful way to grow the guild and we just hope we are able to make this an annual tradition."



Support Groups & Consumer Advocacy Organizations

Statewide

Office of Consumer Relations

Alabama Department of Mental Health
RSA Union Bldg • 100 N. Union Street
P.O. Box 301410 • Montgomery, AL 36130-1410
(334) 242-3456 • 1-800-832-0952
michael.autrey@mh.alabama.gov

Alabama Directions Council

c/o Office of Consumer Relations
P.O. Box 301410 • Montgomery, AL 36130-1410
(334) 242-3456 • 1-800-832-0952

The Visionary Guild for Mentally Ill Artists

For information contact the Office of Consumer Relations
at (334) 242-3456 or 800-832-0952

Alabama Minority Consumer Council (AMCC)

Fannie Hicks, President
P.O. Box 13, Midway, AL 36053, (334) 262-0363

WINGS Across Alabama

PO Box 211286 • Montgomery AL 36124
Call us toll-free at 888 WINGS AL
(334) 395-7616 • fax (334) 395-7618
www.wingsalabama.org

Local

ANNISTON

Emotions Anonymous

c/o Roy Chisam • 1130 Christine Ave., Anniston, AL 36207
Meets Monday through Thursday, 9:00 a.m. – 10:00 a.m.
• Calhoun-Cleburne MHC • (256) 237-3796

BIRMINGHAM AREA

The Sharing Group of Birmingham / So. Highland

c/o Jesse Stinson • 1241 51st Street South, Birmingham, AL 35222
(205) 592-9773 • (fax) 592-9774

Meets Every Sunday, 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.

South Highland Presbyterian • 2035 Highland Avenue

The Sharing Group / Hill Crest

Meets Every Friday, 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.

Hill Crest Hospital • 6869 5th Avenue S.

The Sharing Group / Wednesday

Meets Every Wed, 2:00-4:00 p.m. So Highland Presbyterian

The Sunday Club

Meets Every Sunday, 2:00 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.

South Highland Presbyterian • 2035 Highland Avenue

NEW Beginnings 12 Step Recovery

Bipolar and Depression Support Group

Facilitator, Shane Umlauf

Meets 1st and 3rd Fridays, at Independent Living Resources

206 13th Street South, Birmingham

Call Shane for more information, (205) 903-9792

Recovery, Inc.

Meets every Saturday at 2:00 p.m. • Southside Library, 11th Ave
• Five Points So. *For more information, contact Judy at (205) 918-0746*

Recovery Group of Alabama (formerly Calera Consumer Group)

Meets Wednesdays at the Horsley Home on Highway 31 S. Calera, Alabama • For more information call 205 668-0940

Free Spirit

Meets Wednesdays, 10:00 a.m. - 12:00 noon • UAB West Medical
(Board Room, Suite 201) • 985 9th Avenue SW • Bessemer, AL •
For more info contact George Cook at (205) 481-7645

CULLMAN

R.E.S.T.T.

Nancy Jester, President • Meets the third Friday of each month
1521 McNabb, Cullman • *For more information, call Nancy
at (256) 347-4008*

Wallace Support Group

Roberta Armstrong, President • *Meets 2nd & 4th Thursday
evenings, 6:30 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.* • Wallace State Community College
• 801 Main Street NW, Hanceville, AL • Tom Bevill Building
(Room 608) *For more info call Roberta (256) 734-8169*

EAST-CENTRAL ALABAMA

Revelations Of Self No. 2

Kathleen Roye, President • (334) 741-0228 Meets last Friday of each
month at 6:30 - 8:00 p.m., Frank Brown Rec Center, 235 Opelika
Road in Auburn

HUNTSVILLE

DBSA Huntsville

Dave Hepler, President • Meets Thursdays, 6:00 p.m. United Way
Building, 701 Andrew Jackson Way, Huntsville
For further information call (256) 539-1411

MHCA in Huntsville

c/o Helen Bishop, President • (256) 585-9772
Meets 1st Monday of each month, 2:00 - 3:30 at Our Place Drop-in
Center, 205 Max Luther Drive, Huntsville

Soul Survivors

c/o Yvonne Jones, President • Meets 2nd Fridays, 6:00 p.m. • Angela
Meadows Apartments Community Center • Albertville • For
more information, call (256) 891-9883

Angels Outreach

c/o Ann Jenkins, President
Meets 3rd Thursday of each month, 11:00 a.m.
Boaz, Alabama
For further information, call Ann (256) 593-2374

MOBILE AREA

Schizophrenics Anonymous

Meets 2nd and 4th Tuesdays of each month at Government Street
United Methodist Church in Mobile, 11:00 a.m.
For further information call (251) 438-5928

MONTGOMERY/SELMA

Cahaba Regional Consumer Affairs Committee

Lee Maxwell, President • 1400 McArthur Street • Selma, AL 36701
• (334) 875-9911 • Meets 2nd Tuesdays & 4th Thursdays, 7p.m.
• 302 Franklin Street, Selma (Cahaba Center) • *For further
information call (334) 875-9911 • or call the Clubhouse at (334) 418-
6525, 1:00-6:00 p.m. (Monday- Friday).
www.cahabaconsumeraffairs.com*

DBSA Montgomery

Meets 3rd Saturday of each month, noon - 2:00 p.m.
Montgomery Public Library • For more information contact
Clairepatrese Sams Milligan at (334) 230-9870

Tuesday night group • Meets the 2nd Tuesday of each month • 6:30
- 8:00 p.m. • Office of Dottie D. Skipper, LPC • 1609 West Street,
Montgomery

Orrville Cahaba Outreach Center

c/o Myrna Dukes • 213 Furniss St. • Selma, AL 36701
For more information call Myrna at (334) 874-7124

Montgomery Area Consumer Council

Daniel Pitts, President • (334) 294-7741 • Meets second Thursday
each month, 4:30 pm at the WINGS Across Alabama Office, 400
Eastern Blvd., Suite 201, Montgomery

NORTH WEST ALABAMA

Consumer Outreach

c/o Steve Pendergrass • Meets 2nd Thursday of each month, at
Athens-Limestone Counseling Center, 1307 E. Elm Street, Athens,
AL • For more information, call Steve at (256) 771-1613

Shoals Sharing Group

Steve Goodman, President • (256) 767-4316
Meets 1st & 3rd Sundays (except holidays) from 2:00-3:30 p.m. at
North Wood United Methodist Church, Florence, AL

DBSA of Morgan County

c/o Sue Brantley, MHA in Morgan County, PO Box 1502 Decatur, AL
35602, (256) 353-1160. Meets 2nd and 4th Thursdays 6:30 - 8:00
p.m. at the MHA Office • 207 Commerce Circle, SW, Decatur

The Serenity Group

Liz Volonino, President • Meets 3rd Wednesdays, 10:00 - 12 noon •
Mental Health Center • 4110 Highway 31 South, Decatur, AL
For more info contact Liz at (256) 355-5548

Hogohegee Consumer Wellness Center

Doris Smith, President • 1050 County Road 67, Dept 50, Moulton, AL
35650 • Meets last Monday of each month, 6:00 p.m. At John's
Bar-B-Que 15165 Court Street, Moulton
• For more information call (256) 566-3315

TUSCALOOSA/WEST ALABAMA

The Moodies (Tuscaloosa Chapter of DBSA)

Anne Lynch, President
Meets 2nd Thursday of each month at Friendship House 7:00 p.m.
to 8:30 p.m. • 505 19th Avenue in Tuscaloosa www.moodies.org
*For further information call Anne at (205) 345-4561 or Harley at (205)
439-0076*

Friendship House

c/o Lyn Mizerany
(205) 345-1534 • 505 19th Avenue
Tuscaloosa, AL 35401 Hours of operation
are Monday through Thursday, 8:30 a.m. – 2:45 p.m.
Emotions Anonymous Group meets
Mon. - Thurs., 9:00 a.m. - 10:00 a.m.

Support for Recovery, Tuscaloosa

Meets 3rd Sunday of each month, 4:00 p.m. For meeting location
contact Pamela at (205) 292-5438 or email at almom205@aol.com



“Heroes in the Fight Award”

Mental Health America recognizes

Office of Consumer Relations



Shown from L to R with Governor Bob Riley:
Sharlene McDaniel - Allied Healthcare Professional - Opelika
Rev. Rob Gullledge - Community Supporter - Mobile
Commissioner John Houston
Tawanna Morton - Allied Healthcare Professional - Birmingham
Dr. David Harwood - Psychiatrist - Montgomery
Judge Tracy McCooey - Community Supporter - Montgomery
Jimmy Smoothers - Media Professional - Gadsden
James Jones, Janet Jackson and Mike Autrey - Office of Consumer Relations staff
Wanda Laird, Executive Director, Mental Health America in Montgomery

Mental Health America Alabama Executive Director Wanda Laird presides over the statewide arm of the national organization that recognized Mike Autrey and his staff with the “Heroes in the Fight Award” (see Commissioner John

and persistent mental illness (SPMI) by recognizing ‘heroes’ who provide care and support for persons with SPMI and their families.”

The nominations are anonymous, and are mailed directly to VMS Medical, a group that works with the pharmaceutical company Eli Lilly, which provides financial support for the awards. Once nominations arrive at

VMS Medical, they are sent to a diverse committee that evaluates the nominees and makes the selection of award winners. So not even Laird knows who nominated the Consumer Relations staff.

“We are an organization that educates and advocates for mental wellness,” Laird said. “We do depression screenings in the

tri-county area, and we have both day and night consumer programs. Another of our most important programs is to coordinate Operation Santa Claus. This is a statewide project in which we distribute over 4,000 gifts to people with mental illness. Right at 600 of those gifts are made here in the tri-county area.”

Mental Health America Alabama also runs a referral program for people who call in and want to know where they can get help.

“We refer callers to agencies in our area that are best able to help them,” Laird said. “Also, our public policy committee works with other organizations to provide legislative forums to help educate both consumers and policymakers.”

For more information on the awards program, or to nominate a candidate for next year’s awards, go to <http://www.heroesinthefight.org/index.jsp>.



Office of Consumer Relations wins award

Continued from page 1

care. So long as it is only rhetoric, it means nothing to the hundreds of thousands of people in Alabama and millions across the country who have experienced mental illness first hand or whose family member has been affected by mental illness.

Almost fifteen years ago, the Alabama Department of Mental Health/Mental Retardation took a giant step to move beyond the rhetoric and make a real and tangible commitment to implement a genuine consumer and family driven system. The first Office of Consumer Relations in the nation was established in the Department to give voice to consumers and involve them in the day-to-day decisions and policies that drive the development of mental health care in Alabama. Joel Slack was the first director, later succeeded by Mike Autrey.

What outstanding role models they are to the many other consumers who have faced such challenges. To see someone who has “been there, done that” and see how they have overcome their illness and are indeed controlling their own destinies speaks volumes beyond what we bureaucrats could say. The development of the first Consumer Conference, now an annual event where almost 1,000 consumers gather at Shocco Springs near Talladega each year, is one example of how the Office of Consumer Relations has extended its influence and has empowered so many others to have hope and to follow where others have gone on a path to recovery.

Recently the Department took another step toward empowering consumers as we began implementation of Peer Support Programs across the state, as is further explained in this issue of LISTEN. The Office of Consumer Relations gave impetus to and provided leadership in this major initiative.

Mike, James Jones, and Janet Jackson work in the Office of Consumer Relations. They do outstanding work. But they do more than work. They offer hope. Hope. Recovery. Powerful words made real.

Consumers Lose A Friend

Richard Lee (Dick) Parris, who recently passed away, was well-known to Alabama consumers as the devoted husband of Rogene Parris, the founding president of Alabama NAMI. Dick volunteered hours of time, sweat, and love for the benefit of the NAMI. He hosted consumer fairs every summer; he spearheaded the donation of land and buildings for a Log Cabin Day Treatment Center and two 10-person residential homes (one named the Richard Lee Parris Home); and with his wife Rogene, started and “MC’d” the Annual Christmas Benefit and Raffle for the Birmingham Chapter of NAMI which is now in its 18th year. Dick was a founding member of ALNAMI and Birmingham NAMI. He won so many awards for his tireless service and volunteerism, it is impossible to list them all. He was widely respected and internationally known for his foundry knowledge. He was greatly loved and known far and wide for his humor, never met a stranger, and will be missed more that he could have ever imagined (or hoped for). In lieu of flowers, memorial gifts may be made in Dick’s Name, 1920 Drop-In Center, 1920 10th Ave. South, Birmingham, AL 35206

Autrey, Department excited about increased role of peer support

Continued from page 1

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and by the national organization of state mental health commissioners. And even more recently, the Center for Medicaid and Medicare services sent letters to all the states outlining the certification process necessary for the states to receive Medicaid reimbursement for CPS services. This is a major, transforming event for mental health consumers. We are very excited about it. We have always known peer support worked. Now it has been recognized by professionals at every level.”

In order to become a certified peer support specialist in Alabama, consumers must go through the intensive five-day training period, and pass a series of written and oral examinations.

“For years we have said we wanted a consumer-driven system and this brings us so much closer to that ideal,” Autrey said. “Commissioner John Houston fully embraces the concept, as does Associate Commissioner Susan Chambers, and the time was finally right. They convened key stakeholders in a meeting at AUM, and the idea of putting peer support specialists in the community was received with real enthusiasm. Now we’ve had the training, and the Department has put up one million dollars to fund a full-time equivalent position for a CPS in every community mental health center in the state. Whether that is one person working full time, or two or three people working part-time, we don’t know yet. But we do know this means the consumer is coming first, and will be able to share the knowledge that can only come from experience.”

ALABAMA CONSUMER-RUN DROP-IN CENTER LOCATIONS



FRIENDSHIP HOUSE

505 19th Avenue
Tuscaloosa, AL 35401
(205) 345-1534
Open Monday - Thursday,
8:30 a.m. - 2:30 p.m.

THE 1920 CLUB

1920 10th Avenue South
Birmingham, AL 35205
Open Monday, Tuesday, Thursday
& Friday, 10:00 - 3:00 p.m.
Open Wednesday 2:00 - 7:00 p.m.
Call (205) 933-6955
www.the1920club.com

CAHABA DROP-IN CENTER

302 Franklin Street
Selma, AL
Open 1:00 p.m. - 6:00 p.m. daily
(334) 418-6525 (Clubhouse number)

If no answer, call (334) 875-1850
www.cahabaconsumeraffairs.com

SO-MI CENTER

4351 Midmost Drive
Mobile, AL 36609
(251) 342-0261
Open Monday - Friday,
7:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

OUR PLACE (HAS MOVED)

205 Max Luther Drive,
Huntsville, AL
Open Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and
Fridays from 10:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.
Open Thursdays from 10:00 a.m. - 8:00 p.m.
For more information call (256) 746-4145



To find out more about how to start a drop-in center in your area, call the Office of Consumer Relations at 1 (800) 832-0952.



Alabama Department of Mental Health
Office of Consumer Relations
RSA Union • 100 N. Union Street
P.O. Box 301410
Montgomery, Alabama 36130-1410

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